

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

29 April 2024

Travel support for children and young people – available walking routes update

Report of: Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children and Families

Report Reference No: CF/48/23-24

Ward(s) Affected: All wards

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report details the activity to date in relation to the transport provided for students eligible because they do not have an available walking route (AWR) to school and sets out current and future proposals in relation to these routes.
- 2 The report also provides a brief overview of progress to date against the plans to transform travel support for children and young people to deliver the budget proposals set out in the medium term financial strategy.

Executive Summary

- 3 Significant progress has been made in relation to the activity to transform travel support for children and young people since March 2023. This includes development of a new dynamic purchasing system for transport operators, new arrangements for personal travel budgets, revisions to the school transport policies and a review of walking routes to school which are currently designated as unavailable.
- 4 Following approval at the children and families committee in September 2023, two routes were redesignated as available walking routes and eligibility for free school transport was removed from around 80 pupils attending Brine Leas Academy in Nantwich and The Fallibroome Academy in Prestbury.
- 5 A review of all other routes deemed unavailable to walk (and thereby making affected pupils eligible for free school transport regardless of distance from school) has been underway since September 2023. This review builds upon the work undertaken in 2017 where a number of 'schemes' (roads, crossings,

footway improvements) were implemented in order to allow the designation of those routes to be deemed as AWR.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The children and families committee is recommended to:

1. Endorse the progress to date in relation to the transformation of travel support for children and young people.
2. Approve the proposed methodology and approach to reviewing all other hazardous walking routes in the borough as set out in this paper.
3. Endorse the proposal to bring back any further financially viable improvement schemes which could make further routes 'available walking routes' to a future committee for approval, noting that any capital funding requirements for enabling works on the highway will need to be considered as part of the council's overall programme for highways and transportation.

Background

- 6 In November 2022, the children and families committee considered a report setting out the findings and recommendations from an independent review of travel support for children and young people. The committee agreed a number of recommendations to progress the transformation of travel support over the next three years.
- 7 Subsequent reports have been presented to the committee in March 2023, July 2023, September 2023 and February 2024 to approve details of the overall programme and individual projects and policy changes. An update on progress has been included in each report.
- 8 Since the last paper was considered by committee in February 2024, significant work has been underway in relation to implementing the policy changes and price increases agreed. These changes have been communicated to key stakeholders.
- 9 Work also continues to increase the number of suppliers on the new dynamic purchasing system (DPS) to increase the supply of active contractors and the competition for council contracts. A major route optimisation and retender exercise across the contracted routes in the south of Cheshire East at the end of 2023 was successful in reducing the cost and number of routes in operation. The same exercise is now underway for the north of the borough in time for the new routes to operate from September 2024.

Available walking routes

- 10 In March 2023 members delegated authority to the Executive Director of Children and Families, in consultation with the Executive Director of Place, to make decisions in relation to progressing the milestone and activity in relation to the transformation of travel support. One of these milestones related to the

development of available walking routes, i.e., removing unavailable walking routes (UWRs).

- 11 An UWR is a route which is deemed to be not available to be used when calculating a pupils potential walking route to school for the purposes of distance measurement, which is a major component of whether a pupil is eligible for free school transport or not. The walking distance criteria is 2 miles for children who are below 8 years old and 3 miles for those aged 8 years old and above.
- 12 The council has an adopted policy for assessing whether a route is available to walk and this is based upon the [Department for Education's home to school travel guidance 2014](#) and [Road safety GB – assessment of walked routes to school guidance](#). Currently there are 80+ contracted routes / arrangements transporting 724 pupils who receive free school transport because of unavailable walking routes in Cheshire East.
- 13 In September 2023 members approved the implementation of two new available walking routes. This resulted in the withdrawal of free school transport for around 80 pupils in Prestbury (Fallibroome Academy) and Nantwich (Brine Leas Academy) and annualised savings of approximately £80k. Members also approved the recommendation to review other sites across the borough currently designated as 'unavailable walking routes' for any financially viable improvement schemes which could make those routes 'available walking routes'.
- 14 Eligible pupils at these two schools were given 12 weeks' notice of withdrawal of eligibility (as per council policy) and transport eligibility was removed with effect from 1 January 2024.

AWR activity completed since September 2023

- 15 The first two routes put forward for redesignation were relatively easy to progress in that they did not require any highways alterations as these had already been made. Therefore this only involved physically rechecking the routes, refreshing traffic counts and communicating with members initially and then other stakeholders once the decision had been made.
- 16 Further work has been required to review the feasibility of other schemes. A methodology of approach has been taken in order to ensure that we are looking at the UWRs where a scheme of improvements is going to bring a 'significant' financial benefit for the council. It is also important to note that preliminary investigations into the viability of any further schemes to be presented to members carries a cost at all stages of investigation. However, through the use of the proposed methodology we will seek to minimise this cost.

Methodology / Approach

- 17 There are currently 724 pupils eligible for school transport because of an unavailable walking route to school with around 84 arrangements for transport

support including bus passes, personal travel budgets and contracted vehicles. It is not possible to accurately assign costs to these 724 pupils as the transport arrangements they travel on also transport pupils eligible for reasons other than UWR. The total cost of all the routes carrying pupils with UWR (including the eligible pupils) is in the region of £2.5m per annum.

18 We are following a three step approach to investigating UWRs across the borough:

Step 1

- a. Initial desktop analysis to match existing pupils, routes, route cost and known data about the hazards causing the route to be deemed UWR. This has resulted in the data shown below and was carried out within the transformation budget by our consultants.
- b. A threshold was agreed whereby we put forward to Step 2 those routes where either >50% of the pupils travelling were eligible because of UWR **or** the hazard had not been reviewed in the previous round of UWR reviews **or** the previous review had been inconclusive **or** where there was a mixture of all 3 reasons.

Step 2

- c. Engage with Highways / UWR expert to further visually sift these identified routes through the use of google maps.
- d. This gave us an understanding of the exact road hazards involved, the extent of that hazard and the likelihood as to whether there was likely to be any potential to bring a viable scheme forward that would be credible in terms of payback.
- e. Grade all schemes from 1 (good potential to proceed) through to 5 (no potential to proceed).
- f. It is important to note that this work incurred costs through the council's Highways contract that was not included within the transformation budget.

Step 3

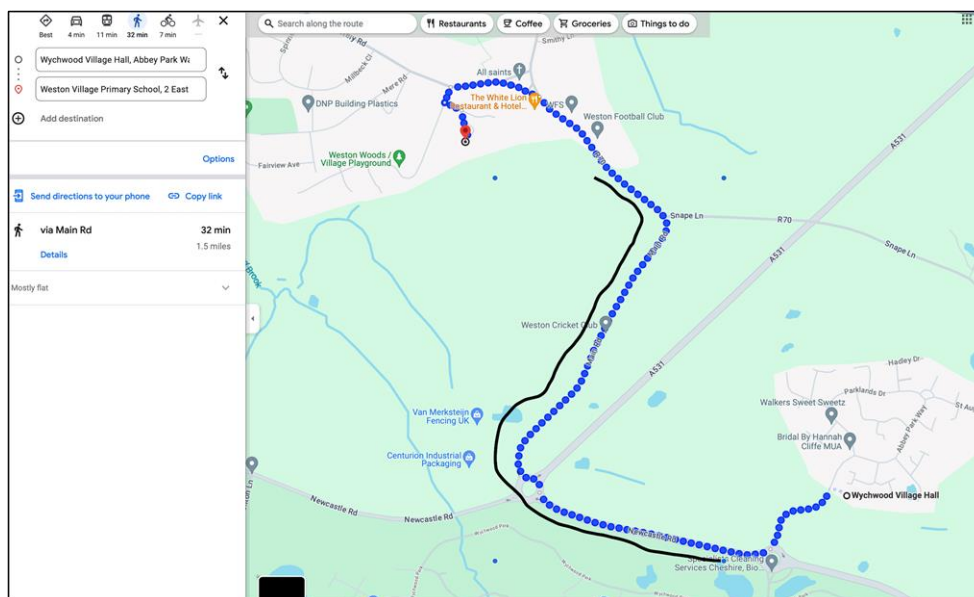
- g. For those schemes where good potential to proceed is identified, undertake a site visit to visually see the roads, traffic volumes, identified hazards and potential for solutions.
- h. Confirm whether the scheme can be taken forward further for inclusion within the Highways programme for feasibility, budget availability / authorisation and potential to be included in the Highways work / capital programme(s).

Future steps

- i. The transformation team will bring together a group of interested parties across transport and highways to take a further look at all the data and see if anything has been missed in terms of opportunities to remove hazards and future agreed build programmes that could affect existing hazards.
- j. In addition, it will be important for the ongoing management of UWRs that there is regular dialogue on the subject between the Highways department and passenger transport team to include this subject but also for 'horizon planning' and early input in terms of building / housing schemes that will have potential to require additional school transport.

Update on progress

- 19 To date, we are a large way through Step 2 of the above process and a number of schemes have presented with potential to be pursued further. Whilst the initial two completed schemes (Prestbury and Nantwich) were relatively easy and quick to bring before members, most others take longer and especially where highways capital improvements are required a time horizon of 12-24 months is not unrealistic.
- 20 Most pupils receiving eligibility for free home to school travel are due to road hazards that cannot be viably removed in order to be able to deem the route as walkable, both in terms of the financial cost to implement walkways / pavements / road improvements but also in many cases because of legal land ownership complications.
- 21 An example of this is the case of pupils both in Wychwood Park and in Wychwood village and the walking route to Weston Village Primary School. The walking route along Newcastle Road and Main Road to Weston Village is well over a mile and there is no pavement for most of the journey.



- 22 The diagram above shows in the dotted blue line the walking route from Wychwood Village to Weston Primary School (the route from Wychwood Park starts just beneath the roundabout but is essentially the same distance), the black line plotted against the blue dotted line shows the extent of the route which has no footway.
- 23 The cost of transport from Wychwood to Weston Village Primary is a portion of a £38k per annum contract which also services Crewe to Sandbach High. The cost of installing a footway is likely to be high (hundreds of thousands) even with cooperative land owners, which is not a viable financial payback proposition.
- 24 A feasibility study undertaken in September 2019 looked at alternative potential walking routes to school over to Snape Lane. It concluded that there was no available walking route principally because of:
- A lack of public right of way (there are permissive paths only)
 - Unwillingness of the landowner to negotiate
 - Overall potential cost to bring the route up to an acceptable standard
- 25 Conditions of the permissive paths in place have worsened since this study was undertaken and so this is an example of a route that we would not look to progress further through the process.

Potential schemes

- 26 A number of schemes have come to light which members will want to understand. Progress against these schemes has been covered briefly below.
- 27 The majority of the pupils eligible under UWR from Malbank come from the Willaston and Blakelow area of housing, with a route that ordinarily would come via Crewe Road, the Peacock roundabout or via the Cheerbrook roundabout and along London Road. Most of these pupils live under 3 miles walking distance from school and would not be eligible for free school transport but for the following two hazards:
- Peacock roundabout** – whilst it is possible to walk to the roundabout, the crossings required based upon traffic counts are not adequate to meet our rules for assessing this part of the journey as available.
 - Level rail crossing on London Road** – the risk at this crossing is that there is only one barrier on each side of the crossing based upon the direction of traffic flow and the potential route to school would involve crossing the railway line on the non-barrier side. In the previous round of UWR reviews the level crossing at London Road passed the council's assessment to deem it an available route from a highways perspective, although rail safety and risk assessments at level crossings is the responsibility of Network Rail. As part of the previous review, some electronic signage improvements were made on the non-barriered side on both sides

of the crossing, however this was not redesignated due to concerns about the single barrier. Discussions are ongoing with Network Rail to explore the potential impact on the risk assessment if additional school children were to use the route.

- 28 In terms of the Peacock roundabout hazard, a scheme of improvement utilising some Section 106 funding is already at the feasibility stage and the transformation programme is linking in with this proposal in order to understand what is to be achieved and how it can be influenced to allow us to pass this route as available once construction has been completed.
- 29 For the level rail crossing on London Road, the transformation team has made contact with the relevant Network Rail representative regarding this crossing. Network Rail assess this crossing for safety on an annual basis and this is currently underway. However unless there is a significant change, they are unlikely to change their risk profile and make any further safety improvements e.g. extending barriers the full way across on both sides. Attempts to influence this include the following:
- a. We have supplied Network Rail with the numbers of children that may have to cross at this crossing in the future if the council were to revert to its standard AWR rules and deem this route as available.
 - b. We are undertaking pedestrian and traffic counts at the crossing, both during the week and at the weekend, to understand the volume of traffic and the subset volume that is pupil or young people crossing. We are trying to ascertain the level of current usage and therefore the level of risk involved should this crossing be deemed as available. Results will be brought to members for consideration, however, members may wish to simply revert to utilising the council's standard rules which when previously applied deemed this route to be available.
- 30 **Alsager School** - Alsager School has 89 pupils currently eligible for free school transport because of a hazardous route. Most of these pupils travel from Rode Heath and the full cost of transport is £93k per annum. There are 111 pupils in total travelling on the routes that carry these 89 passengers so a proportion of the £93k annual cost will remain even if the walking route hazards can be removed.
- 31 The work carried out to date has discovered a potentially available route that could be utilised this is:
- (i) Walking from Rode Heath to the A50 and utilising the recently constructed crossing on the A50.
 - (ii) Utilising the existing pavement on the A50 up to the Lawton Arms.
 - (iii) Utilising the route behind the Lawton Arms to join the B5077.
 - (iv) Crossing the A50 at the B5077 at the traffic lights and walking through to the school from through Alsager.

- 32 A number of issues will need to be assessed / overcome before this can be brought to members for a decision:
- (i) Traffic counts at three crossings will be needed to ascertain if further crossing improvements are required, in particular if traffic light improvements will be needed at the intersection of the B5077 and the A50. Traffic counts are already underway.
 - (ii) Assessment of the existing footpath on the A50 where excess vegetation has started to encroach on the width of the path.
- 33 Other potential schemes are in the early stages of development / review and these include:
- (a) The Macclesfield Academy where 8 pupils from Gawsorth are currently eligible due to an UWR at a cost of £26k per annum.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 34 The current arrangements for providing travel support for children and young people are unsustainable as the budget is under increasing pressure. The removal of travel support to ineligible pupils is one of the ways in which members have agreed to reduce this pressure. Whilst the removal of certain routes will lead to a reduction in the annual school transport budget, this needs to be balanced against the overall capital costs to the council of providing the necessary works to deem these routes available plus any future revenue implications on the highways budget in order to ensure routes are maintained to an adequate standard.

Other Options Considered

- 35 The council could continue to provide travel support for ineligible pupils, but this would not reduce the current budget pressure. Continuation of home-to-school transport provision may be the more cost effective option in locations where the capital costs required to make a route available are prohibitively expensive and do not offer sufficient value-for-money. The assessment of value for money will be on a route-by-route basis, as proposals are developed further.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 36 The local authority is required by the Education Act 1996 as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to make suitable travel arrangements for eligible children to attend school. This includes the duty to promote sustainable modes of travel for children and young people of compulsory school age. The government has also issued statutory guidance called Home-to-school travel and transport guidance 2014.

- 37 This means that a local authority is under a duty to have regard to it when performing their duties in relation to home to school travel and transport and sustainable travel.
- 38 The local authority's transport duties apply in respect of arrangements for young people aged 16-18 years and those continuing learners up to 19 years. Under Section 509(AA) Education Act 1996 the local authority has a duty to set its own transport policy, details of transport arrangements and financial assistance in respect of reasonable travelling expenses that the local authority considers it necessary to ensure access to education or training for learners of sixth form age. The local authority must publish the statement before the 31 May and publishing by that date would demonstrate adherence with the law.
- 39 Section 509 (AB) (1) Education Act 1996 requires local authorities to set out how their transport statement facilitates the attendance of young people with SEND.
- 40 Local authorities should publish their transport policies on their "local offer" as required under s30 of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- 41 The local authority has a legal duty to ensure that any decision it makes is transparent and as the details in this paper are simply about enforcing existing policies no consultation is required.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 42 The current arrangements for providing travel support for children and young people are unsustainable. The transport budget accounts for almost 20% of the budget for children's services. Any savings made against this budget will be reinvested into children's services and used to target those children and young people most in need through the MTFS.
- 43 Budget proposals relating to the transformation of travel support form part of the council's medium term financial strategy MTFS 24. This includes a funding increase for home to school transport costs of £8.5m between 2023/24 and 2027/28, but changing eligibility criteria to maintain a sustainable service. These proposals are a key part of this change and would help realise a proportion of savings that are included in the £2.1m proposed savings, included within the +£8.5m MTFS, over the next four years.
- 44 A breakdown of the school transport budget for 2023/24 is set out below:

| Budget Area | £'000 |
|--|---------------|
| Direct Transport - Home to School Contracts | 15,237 |
| Commissioning Budget - School Crossing Patrol & Flexi link | 395 |
| Staffing | 525 |
| Spare Seat and Post 16 Income | -57 |
| Further Mitigation - Challenge process SEND | -500 |
| Estimated savings put forward by Edge | -545 |
| Total Budget | 15,055 |

- 45 Proposals regarding availability of walking routes to school form part of the 'Estimated savings put forward by Edge' line of the budget.
- 46 Any works undertaken to remove hazards and make routes suitable to be deemed "available" requires input from Highway Service and will incur costs. Moreover, if any pathways, crossings or other highways improvements are proposed, this will not only require capital funding but ongoing revenue funding for maintenance will also need to be considered. Integration with the council's annual programmes for highway works is essential through consultation with the Director of Highways and Infrastructure. A decision will need to be made on a case by case basis whether there is an overall cost saving for the council in carrying out these works.

Policy

- 47 The eligibility for transport in relation to available walking routes is set out in the council's school transport policies. Proposals within this paper are in line with the current policies.
- 48 Proposals support the following council's priorities and aims.

| An open and enabling organisation | A council which empowers and cares about people | A thriving and sustainable place |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision making</p> <p>Support a sustainable financial future for the council, through service development, improvement and transformation</p> | <p>Ensure all children have a high quality, enjoyable education that enables them to achieve their full potential</p> | <p>A transport network that is safe and promotes active travel including walking</p> |

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 49 An equality impact assessment has been completed in relation to transformation of travel support and specific to the work around available walking routes.

Human Resources

- 50 There are no HR implications in relation to the proposals within this report.

Risk Management

- 51 A risk management framework has been established as part of the transformation programme for travel support.

- 52 This change is taking place within the rules of the current school transport policies, however, there will be a number of parents / carers who will lose free school transport because of these changes and it is likely that this will lead to an increase in complaints.
- 53 There is a risk the council could spend money on schemes that will not provide the necessary revenue savings to offset these costs. The proposed methodology will identify these schemes to avoid unnecessary spend.

Rural Communities

- 54 Children and young people across all areas of Cheshire East access travel support. However, as the statutory provision of free home-to-school transport is based on distance to school, residents in rural areas of the borough are more likely to be eligible for travel support and therefore affected by any changes. Children living in rural communities often rely on travel support to access their learning and any proposals to improve the delivery and customer experience for these services supports these rural communities.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 55 Children, young people, and their parents are key stakeholders in the transformation programme, and this proposal looks to improve travel options for eligible students.

Public Health

- 56 The provision of walking and cycling routes to school and promoting active travel, including safer walking routes to school, is in line with our Public Health priorities. Extending and improving the travel options available could encourage more active and healthy methods of getting students to school.

Climate Change

- 57 If approved, the proposals in this report will mean that more pupils will have an available walking route to school than was previously the case. Should parents decide to transport their children instead of walking, there is potential for increased traffic. However, we will be looking at options for parents to buy spare seats, if appropriate.

| Access to Information | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Contact Officer: | Richard Hibbert, Head of Strategic Transport & Parking Richard.Hibbert@cheshireeast.gov.uk |
| Appendices: | N/A |
| Background Papers: | The current school transport policies can be found at: School transport policies (cheshireeast.gov.uk) |